**Eighth Sunday after Trinity (Proper 13)**

Evensong

Psalm 80 | 1 Kings 10:1-13 | Acts 13:1-13

The Authority of the Holy Spirit

Yesterday morning, Clare and I went out early to Agden Reservoir. We walked through the woods down to the water’s edge. The surface was like glass and the air so still that we could hear individual sheep calling to their lambs in the fields above the opposite shore.

Not wishing to break that early morning stillness, or to disturb the ducks, I controlled a childish impulse and, instead just imagined what it would be like to throw a pebble far out into the middle of the water. Droplets rising at the point of impact and ripples spreading in concentric circles further and further out from the centre.

It’s an image which sprang to mind when reading today’s passage from Acts. In the first chapter of Acts, just before his ascension, Jesus appears to the disciples and tells them of the geographical plan for the work of the apostles:

[But] you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.

Those three places of apostolic witness (Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria, and ‘to the ends of the earth’) form the three main acts of the drama we see played out in the Book of Acts... the ripples of the Jesus movement gradually spreading further and further.

Act I (Chapters 1-7) records the work of the Apostles based in Jerusalem; in Act II (the following five chapters) we hear how the spread of the Good News comes about almost by accident as, after Stephen’s death, frightened believers were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. And so we arrive at the start of Chapter 13… Act III… and there is a shift in impetus... we are moving out into uncharted waters. Importantly, this third phase of God’s growing geographical mission begins with a deliberate and prayerful step undertaken by the church in Antioch. A young church founded by refugees from persecution (in Chapter 11) now becomes a missionary church in its own right.

In today’s reading we learn of the multinational and multicultural nature of early Christianity. Apart from the increasingly mixed ethnicity of the group of what we read are ‘prophets and teachers’, we come across Sergius Paulus, the intelligent and thoughtful Roman proconsul of Cyprus at the time. After talking to Paul, John Mark and Barnabas, and seeing the miracle that Paul performs, Sergius Paulus converts to Christianity.

Here in Act III of Acts, as the ripples of God’s mission spread out from Jerusalem, new christian communities are being shaped by their interaction with Roman and Greek culture, philosophy, assumptions and structures. At some point, no doubt, Paul and Barnabas will return to Jerusalem and report on the effect that their message is having - not only in the synagogues, but in the government, the army, the civil service. The occupiers are receiving the good news as readily as the occupied.

I wonder how that meeting might have gone. Back in Jerusalem, how do the original apostles view Paul? If we had been there with Jesus through everything, following him wherever he went, seeing him turn the tables over in the temple, teaching thousands, healing the sick and raising the dead and then watching the authorities nail him to a cross, how would we feel about Paul? After all, he hasn’t met Jesus. Where does he get his interpretation of the life, death and resurrection of a man he’s never met? We might want to guard Jesus' legacy… to hang on to what we know - our treasured memory. We might be resistant to new truths, new perspectives and different interpretations.

This seems to me to raise some questions about authority. How does a new movement grow? Who has the power? As the ripples spread over the face of the water, as Paul’s mission moves further away from the twelve disciples in Jerusalem, the locus of authority may feel like it’s becoming less clear. The disciples hid behind a locked door. Paul is heading out into uncharted waters a mission to build the church.

A few weeks ago members of Hallam Deanery Synod were asked to reflect upon their parishes’ experience of church in the time of Covid. Ahead of the meeting, some questions were shared around the group to prompt discussion:

During these weeks and months of pandemic and lockdown, as a church community:

* What have we lost that we long to get back?
* What have we lost that we’re happy to stay lost?
* What have we gained that we’re looking forward to letting go of in time?
* What have we gained that we’d like to hang onto?

Of these questions, it is the last one which intrigues me the most. This has of course been a time of huge loss and pain and we must make space to lament but, amid the grief and upheaval there’s also been newness and joy. What have we gained that we’d like to hang onto?

It feels like we have an opportunity to reflect on where we are as a nation and as the Church to reflect where we want to go. Equally, we might reflect on these questions as individual disciples, looking for new ways to share the love of God with the world.

Amidst all of the Covid clamour, is this actually a time of stillness? Are we at a point where the world, society, the Church are being offered a space? A moment of relative calm? The early morning surface of a lake waiting for ripples to form. If that is so, how do we move forward? Where’s the authority? Who has the power? What will we hang onto? What will we let go?

These are fundamental questions for the Church, for our nation and for each of us as members of a society which continues to struggle with race, sexuality, poverty, care for the elderly. It’s easy to feel that we, like Paul, are in the deepest of uncharted waters… to feel like we’d rather, like the twelve, lock the door against the outside world.

Remember though, what the risen Christ says to those confused and frightened disciples in Acts 1 verse 8.

[But] you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.’

And from our reading:

While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said ‘Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them’.

Here is the authority. Here is the power. Here is where we find answers to our questions. Here’s where we find the sort of wisdom that might have the Queen of Sheba knocking on our door to ask us some of her most challenging questions.

Worship, prayer and allowing God the Holy Spirit the space to speak into our lives is where we find answers to life’s difficult questions. It’s where we find the bravery to step out into the new, to sail into uncharted waters.

It’s so easy to feel that the authority and the power lie in the way things have always been... in a society which still struggles to allow each of us to flourish… to grow into the person that God has created us to be.

But God has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit: our loving guide, our authority, our source of wisdom… we just need to be willing to make space to listen.

What do we want to keep? What do we want to let go? Have we the courage to accept God’s call, as Paul did, to sail faithfully out into uncharted waters?

My prayer is that each of us may be guided by God to the gift of stillness in this time… that with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we may find the courage to create a few ripples in our daily lives... that we may welcome in the wisdom to discern what we could let go, and what we should nurture, so that we and all those we meet might grow in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

After all, Jesus himself calls us and reassures us that, through the power of the Holy Spirit, we will be his witnesses to the ends of the earth.

Amen